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The Power and Influence of
Dr. R. Tait McKenzie

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 Tribute and Thanks to R. Tait McKenzie for
 the Power and the Influence bestowed on me
 during my lifetime and the career he started.

A S T R A N G E C H R O N I C L E

The Power and Influence of
Dr. R. Tait McKenzie

C H A P T E R O N E

Many books have been written about Dr. R. Tait McKenzie's sculpture of young athletes. He was a medical doctor of the highest caliber, and his full knowledge of anatomy and kinesiology, plus being a professor of Physical Education, made it possible for him to achieve true perfection in any of the athletic figures he chose to select. His world war one memorials still carried the ideals of youth expressed so aptly in the statues he designed and made.

These writers seemed to overlook the distinct power and influence which would permeate from his clay to the finished bronze models. We know that some people have a healing power in laying on hands, but with Tait McKenzie, it was the passing on of his inspiration, courage, and enthusiasm, and an unknown quality which did so much for others.

Scott Young once wrote that there was close to a McKenzie cult. With me, it was more of a simple force, which stepped in unexpectedly to take over and control a strange chronicle of events that formed a modest but colourful life pattern for me.

Tait's father named William, was a Scottish minister who had settled in Almonte, Ontario with his bride Catherine Shiels, originally from Galashiels in Scotland. Their family eventually included three sons, William, Robert Tait, Bertram and an only daughter Agnes. All grew up to

excell in their professions. William, studying for the ministry, switched horses mid-stream, to later become President of the Christian Science Church in Boston, an associate of Mary Baker Eddy, and editor of the Christian Science Monitor. Fond of poetry, he wrote several of their Church Hymns. Bertram became an engineer and specialized in civil engineering. Agnes, who became a teacher, was instrumental in forming one of the first kindergartens in London, Ontario. Robert Tait was called Raab or Rob by his Mother. He became a graduate in medicine from McGill, where he also developed a great interest in physical education and gymnastics in particular. Little did he realize that this would contribute much to his fame as a sculptor of young athletes.

Tait's father died when he was nine years old, and just before his brother Bertram was born. It was a struggle for his Mother to raise her family. Given a piano by her sister Helen and her husband John Bertram, she was able to give music lessons which helped provide for the children. This young couple had been married by her husband in the wee kirk, and remained very close when any need arose as the years sped by.

They had both happened to have babies born in May during 1867. Helen had a daughter Isabella Agnes, and Catherine (Katie) McKenzie a son Robert Tait. The two small babies were christened together in the Almonte kirk, close to the date of the Canadian Confederation. They grew up to be good friends, and when they both reached their seventieth birthday, Ella received lovely red roses from Tait with his love and best wishes for "A long and happy life, as long as you can enjoy it, and no more."

This she had for over ninety years, but Tait was less fortunate than my Mother, as he died the following year.

Still his birthday was a gala occasion on his seventieth as well.

During a dinner in his honour his toast was in the form of an imaginary tale:

"On the morning of his first anniversary, his parents decided it was time to find out what Raab was good for. They set him in the middle of the floor, and put near him a Bible, a bottle of pills, and a lump of clay. He swallowed the pills, seized and squeezed the clay, set the Bible up on edge and jumped over it. They could not make up their minds what this portended, but Raab knew. He had already decided that for a man of his parts at least three professions were indicated. He was on his way to becoming a physician, a sculptor and a professor of physical education."

This fairy tale turned out to be true after all. There was still one more profession to be added to the list which included his writing of text books written for use during the first world war.

Tait was always keenly interested in his work, and it was not until he was physician to Lord Aberdeen that he took a fatal trip overseas. On board were a group of young ladies, all musicians from the Royal Conservatory of music planning to study abroad. Their chaperone, who was to be a concert pianist, scuttled Tait's much enjoyed bachelorhood, and lovely Ethel O'Neil became his bride when they were married in Dublin Castle, and Lord Aberdeen gave the bride away.

A suitable house was eventually purchased in Philadelphia where he was to be at the University of Pennsylvania. The tall narrow four story building at 2014 Pine Street already had a studio as it had been owned by Leopold Stowkowski, the famous leader of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. His marriage to Olga Samaroff was in the process of breaking up, as she was a caustic music critic for the press, and it did not add to any happiness.

It was a most unusual house, tucked in a narrow row of attached buildings, which were distinguished by their scrubbed snow-white marble door-steps, small pillars, and highly polished brass door-knockers, door knobs and in most cases a shiny name-plate. Shutters at the main floor bay-window gave privacy and a feeling of security the moment dusk turned to darkness. Inside the front entrance there were two reception areas. One for business callers and the other for friendly guests. The small hallway also led to the servant's sitting-room and the kitchen beyond. The curved stair lined on one side with celebrity photographs, caught the eye of the guests proceeding to the floor above.

From the kitchen, meals were hoisted via the dumb-waiter by pulling on the strong ropes while the butler dashed up the narrow back-stairs to nonchalantly remove them, and serve hot to the dinner guests. Meal-times could be formal with the lighted gargoyle bronze candle-sticks designed by Tait, or more relaxed mixed with the humorous stories Tait loved to relate. Two very large portraits watched over all the guests. One was of Tait in his Major's uniform, and the other of Ethel in a soft rose dress. Both were painted in darker tones and seemed to add little colour or gaiety to the dinner hour.

Off the dining room was a convenient location for the high ceilinged studio. While a fireplace could supply warmth and cheer, I seldom recall seeing it used. It seemed that engrossed energy at work supplied sufficient heat. Work tools were in well organized confusion. Tait liked company, yet was in a world of his own while working on clay, regardless of time and events. Ethel had to remind him of appointments, and time out for meals.

During this obsession for his work, it was a blessing that she had her Chickering grand piano in the living-room where she could relax in comfort. At times, while deep in her musical classics, she would wonder what success she might have achieved, had she gone on with her promising career of study with the world famous concert pianist in Berlin, Germany, instead of falling in love with the handsome doctor, as she crossed the Atlantic. These thoughts passed by quickly as her social life expanded, and their love for art and music became a happy combination.

If ever she thought her music might be disconcerting to her husband, she would go up to the next floor and continue practising on the silent keyboard kept in the bedroom, or rest on the large canopied four-poster bed. The chintz covered windows provided light for many hours spent writing at her desk, which always seemed to gather piles of letters to answer and notices and invitations to acknowledge.

Another bedroom on this floor was always kept ready for guests, with a second one available on the top floor for the strong hearted who could manage the three flights of soft carpeted stairways.

Tait and Ethel found this house ideal, yet unsuitable when they thought of having Tait's Mother and sister join their household. My great Aunt Katie and cousin Agnes were of vastly different temperaments, and could not survive the demands of life in Philadelphia. A solution was imminent when Tait's Aunt Helen invited them to stay with her, and feel free to visit her sons whenever she wished. It was a fine arrangement, as my grandmother now widowed, had a large home where they could enjoy their social life together with many mutual friends.

C H A P T E R T W O

It was during the Easter holidays of 1925, as Mother and I were returning to Canada from Atlantic City, that we made our visit to the McKenzies. I at last would meet the cousin who had been christened with her. I had known all about him, but our paths had never crossed. Arriving at the house, we were ushered upstairs to the living room where he greeted us warmly with a firm handshake and embrace. I found him to be of average height, and of slim and wirey build, which confirmed that he had excelled in athletics. His eyes were piercing in a kindly way, and had a noticeable McKenzie slant to the upper eyelid which was also typical with his brothers and sister Agnes. It was even more pronounced when his eyes wrinkled as he smiled. Although I had seen photographs of a good sized moustache, it was now well-trimmed to suit the trend of the moment. Pince-nez glasses were perched on the narrow bridge of his nose and held tightly in place, yet could be quickly removed by releasing the clasp using only two fingers. It helped that Tait was deft with both right or left hands. I noticed his hands were shaped as an artist but showed the dexterity of a surgeon. He could no doubt make an incision deep in clay, with the intensity he felt might give life to the figure as he worked on him. His clothes were meticulous, and you knew he would look equally distinguished in either his business suit and bowler hat, the McKenzie kilts, or his swallow-tail coat and white tie.

Ethel too, had a pronounced dignity as she sat straightly in her cushion-backed chair. Her highly arched eyebrows had a permanently quizzical air, yet her large brown eyes had great depth, and added a mellow

beauty to her well structured features. A slight upward tilt to her nose provided a girlish appeal in an enchanting way. One was attracted to her mass of lovely steel gray hair which framed her face and curled to make all her hats look most attractive. You just knew all her ward-robe would contain high-fashion models, and it did.

My newly met relatives were indeed highly interesting, and felt our visit would be all too short.

I was then suddenly brought back to the present moment, by my Mother mentioning my coming graduation in physical education at the Margaret Eaton School. Tait seemed to be most impressed with my choice of career. I was to be sports director at the Montreal Y.W.C.A. Camp during the coming summer. He seemed very pleased about all this, looked over at my Mother as a slow smile crept over his face, then turned to me and asked "How would you like to come to an American College, and get further experience in their physical education?" I already knew they played field hockey here while we did ice hockey at home. They had started Danish fundamental gymnastics, and we studied Swedish. I could hardly wait to give my affirmative answer, which also met with family approval.

From there, the ball started rolling.

Or was it that the Power and Influence was infiltrating!

We immediately left for Bryn Mawr College, to see Miss Constance M.K. Applebee, nationally known for introducing field hockey to the United States. She had been at the College over twenty years and was known for the fantastic May Day programmes she directed every four years, and her great interest in all phases of physical education. Both she and Tait were leaders in their



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